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SUBJECT: Taiwan Research Institute: Cross-Strait Understanding
Improving, but Still Not Sufficient

Ref: 08 Guangzhou 170

¶1. (SBU) Summary: "Ignorance is our greatest enemy," said Professor Liu Guoshen of Xiamen University's Taiwan Research Institute (TRI) as he opened a recent meeting with visiting American scholars. TRI academics used the opportunity to emphasize the value of direct exchanges between PRC and Taiwan officials and scholars. They also offered what sounded like well-rehearsed critiques of Taiwan's democracy and tendency to focus political and military discussions on PRC-based short-range missiles and other "micro-level" issues. Chinese scholars said they expect cross-Strait economic and cultural ties to continue expanding despite a slower pace for political confidence building. End Summary.

Direct Exchange, Not Media Coverage, is Key

¶2. (SBU) Thirteen American scholars met with faculty from Xiamen University's Taiwan Research Institute (TRI) as part of the Public Intellectuals Program of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. Professor Liu Guoshen led an unusually frank exchange of views that focused on the Mainland's continuing need for direct communication with Taiwan in order to increase mutual understanding and resolve differences. Several TRI academics cited their recent visit to Taiwan and unprecedented expansion of contact with representatives of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as important indicators that person-to-person contacts are growing positively.

¶3. (SBU) Political Science Assistant Professor Li Peng said that only reading media reports and academic works can easily lead officials and academics on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to misunderstandings. Li complained that journalists from the Mainland's popular Global Times Newspaper (Huanqiu Shibao) frequently request interviews with him and other researchers, but they often publish out-of-context quotations that mislead readers "in order to sell more papers." Li expressed his belief that media outlets in Taiwan also engage in similar behavior, which he said necessitates increased direct exchanges.

Taiwan's Democracy Perceived as Corrupt

¶4. (SBU) Professor Liu declared that Chinese academics have studied the implementations of democracy in the United States and Taiwan and they see many negative aspects. Liu claimed, and other TRI scholars

reiterated, that the greatest weakness in Taiwan's democratic system is "vote buying" and other "irregularities," including the 2004 election-related shooting of former President Chen Shui-bian. Without acknowledging the irony in his statements, Professor Liu said the amount of money required for someone in Taiwan to become mayor of a town or to run for the Legislative Yuan is akin to "buying" the position, which the scholars said demonstrates why democratic elections are not "a good fit" for Taiwan or China. Responding to follow-up questions, Assistant Professor Zhang Wensheng added that mainland scholars and officials also see Taiwan's "mafia" and "criminal economic schemes" -- such as phone and internet scams -- as social threats that will need to be addressed as closer ties develop.

China's Missiles and the PLA's Diverse Voices

15. (SBU) Responding to questions about the PLA role in China's cross-Straits policy, Assistant Professor Li Peng acknowledged that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and China's foreign affairs agencies sometimes appear to support differing policy views. Li cited Senior Colonel Wang Weixin of the PLA Academy of Military Science as one prominent PLA voice on cross-Straits issues, but cautioned that Colonel Wang is only one of many voices that the Central Government considers when making policy decisions. Professor Li also suggested that PLA views may appear more strident to outsiders because their job is to plan and prepare for worst-case scenarios; China-U.S. military-to-military relations are underdeveloped; and different PLA units view cross-Straits issues based on their specific roles and background.

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16. (SBU) On the question of mainland missiles aimed at Taiwan, Political Science Professor Chen Xiancai asserted that improved technology has reduced the emphasis on short-range missiles because longer-range inland-based missiles are now capable of similar missions. Assistant Professor Li said there had been a lot of discussion and exchange on the missile question and other military issues, but the two sides fundamentally see the missile issue differently. Taiwan makes the Fujian-based missiles into a major issue, while PRC academics believe problems related to Taiwan's "sense of security" (anquan gan) are more about broad politics than micro-level military unit issues, according to Li.

Economic and Cultural Ties Flourishing

17. (SBU) Taiwan's expanded cross-strait engagement has mostly focused on economic incentives, according to Professor Zhang Wensheng. If direct investment opportunities continued to expand for PRC entities, Zhang said the benefits of closer ties would be even more obvious to the people of Taiwan. Cultural ties have also increased as cross-strait marriages exceeded 260,000 this year. Allowing more PRC students to earn university and graduate degrees in Taiwan would also help draw the two sides closer together, said Zhang. However, Professor Li concluded that building political trust across the Taiwan Strait would continue to be a slow process and would depend most importantly on increased engagement.

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